INL News Release
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Preparations for INL's 2012 fire season under way

IDAHO FALLS — Firefighters at the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory are preparing for the 2012 wildland fire season. Every spring, the INL Fire Department reviews its fire preparation procedures and lessons learned from previous fires. This information is used to protect people, property and the environment at the desert site from future wildland fires.

Fire danger on INL's 890 square miles of high desert land west of Idaho Falls is expected to increase as the grasses and sagebrush dry during the summer.

"The INL did not experience much of a snow pack at all this winter," INL Fire Chief Eric Gosswiller said. "That has contributed to more standing grasses carrying over into this fire season than we typically see. The green up of vegetation also seems to be a couple of weeks ahead of what we've seen the past few years. A lot depends on what kind of weather we see over the next month or so but I think we might see critical fuel conditions a bit earlier this season. The seasonal outlook projects a normal large fire potential in southeast Idaho. As things dry out in July and August, we expect conditions that will support large fires."

INL has an experienced and well-trained fire department and emergency response organization that has demonstrated the ability to effectively respond to the large winddriven fires that occur on the desert. In 2011, the T-17 fire burned more than 50,000 acres on site. In 2010, the Jefferson Fire burned more than 100,000 acres. Since 1994, the INL has averaged six fires a year and a seasonal total fire acreage of more than 16,000 acres. Throughout this period, the INL site experienced no significant facility damage. Defensible space buffer zones containing little or no fire fuel exist around major buildings and facility complexes.

"We have a well trained fire department that has developed extensive wildland firefighting experience as a result of the large fires that periodically occur at INL," Gosswiller added. "We view each fire as a learning opportunity to further improve our response tactics while ensuring firefighter safety. We've also focused on improving our coordination with BLM and other agencies that assist INL in these large fires."

Three fire stations are located at the INL site, each with wildland firefighting equipment. The fire department maintains four heavy, Type 4 wildland fire engines and a 3,000-gallon water tender. Wildland firefighting units are outfitted with onboard compressed-air foam systems capable of making heavy, clinging or water-saturated foam that suppresses and blankets flames and protects exposures.

Additional heavy equipment, including bulldozers for fire line construction, is available from the INL fleet to support wildland firefighting. INL keeps at least 22 firefighting staff on duty at all times. If additional responders are needed, the fire department will recall off-duty employees to bring its force up to 75 qualified wildland firefighters.

If more equipment and/or workers are needed, INL has reciprocal firefighting agreements with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service and most regional fire departments including but not limited to the cities of Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, Pocatello, Arco, Rexburg, American Falls, Chubbuck and Rigby.

Additional planned actions, as conditions warrant, to reduce the dangers of a wildland range fire this summer are:

- Annual wildland fire hazard and vegetation assessments
- Aggressive vegetation control along facility perimeters and interconnecting roadways
- Fire danger advisories to all INL employees about the high fire potential and precautions they need to take
- Fire restrictions regarding the use of off-road vehicles and off-road activities
- Constant "real-time" weather monitoring stations
- Heavy equipment (bulldozers, scrapers, water tenders, etc.) to be maintained in readiness for wildland fire response
- Heavy-equipment operators trained for wildland fire response
- Restrictions on hot work activities (welding, etc.) outside facility perimeters, and
- Maintaining defensible spaces around important structures and equipment

INL's electrical power loop is redundant, so during wildland fires, power supplies are redirected and maintained. Major Site areas have emergency backup power supplies.

The INL Emergency Operations Center in Idaho Falls and all major facilities at the site maintain a fully trained and qualified response organization. Emergency control centers are located at each major facility complex. During a wildland fire, these groups are able to ensure timely communications with firefighting responders and execute necessary protective actions for INL facilities.

Risks to radiological facilities and important buildings at INL are manageable because of natural and constructed firebreaks, the predominant use of noncombustible construction materials, and the presence of reliable water supplies and automatic fire suppression systems at the site.

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